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Sealing Up Government

Congress will now have time to hold hearings on the broadest government attempt at censorship in our history. That is the most significant aspect of the Senate vote last week to block for six months the censorship directive that President Reagan put into effect last March without consulting Congress.

The directive would impose lifetime censorship on more than 100,000 government officials who handle sensitive information. Under the scheme, government employees with access to classified information would have to sign an agreement to submit to pre-publication review all written material that they plan to make public whether or not it contains classified material. During their government careers and for the rest of their lives they would be under the thumb of a government censor. Even fiction based on their experience in government would have to be submitted to the censor, whose orders could be enforced by court injunction.

Nothing like this has ever been attempted by a prior administration, and the censorship directive

not only violates the First Amendment rights of government officials but, more ominously, also undermines the public's right to be fully informed on matters of grave consequence to the nation.

Would it make sense for officials of a prior Administration not to be able to comment on the current situation in Lebanon without submitting their statements for approval to the Reagan Administration? The mere thought is absurd. The Reagan order, intended to guard sensitive information, is so extreme that it itself is a threat to national security because it would deprive the public of access to a broad range of views necessary for informed public debate.

The action of the Republican-controlled Senate gives Congress two opportunities: first, to examine every aspect of the censorship directive, and, second, to write into law, if necessary, a carefully defined policy that protects secrets without undermining the First Amendment. The present directive is simply unacceptable.